A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Chapter 22

In the morning, Esera woke with a splitting headache, which was compounded by the sudden horror that washed over her as she remembered just what had happened. *I didn't even have my Force powers,* thought Esera, a chill settling in her heart. *That vile man could have done whatever he wanted to me... I owe Khan one.*

Yashar was thinking along the same lines. She sat at the window, gazing out over the city lit gold by the early morning sun. The quiet Togruta finally spoke. "Even you aren't safe from him," she murmured. "He'd have had you too, if it wasn't for that call, right?"

"Yes." Esera clenched her fists until her knuckles went white. *This isn't a mission I can fail,* she thought. *I can't stop every evil in the galaxy, but I can stop this.* And she could avoid alcohol for the rest of her life, too.

"That's strange. I thought he'd know better than to bite the hands that feed him. You Separatists are why I'm here, after all," said Yashar.

No, I'm not! Esera wanted to say. *Blamed for the Republic's crimes, blamed for the Separatist's crimes! I must be the most horrible girl in the galaxy.* But she had a role to play. "Count Dooku was a fool to align with this abominable empire," Esera said. "If I fail to bring this wretched monarch to heel, Grievous will be furious. His people were hunted by slavers once, you know."

"So, even the monster has something of a heart left," Yashar murmured. "What happens if you fail?"

"Grievous will come and glass the whole planet," said Esera.

"I would gladly die if it meant dragging these creatures to the underworld with me," Yashar said. "Perhaps I will pray for your failure, Separatist. This place can only be cleansed with fire."

Even through the muddled Force, Esera could feel the pain of the Togruta girl. She had every reason to hate the Zygerrians so. And yet, the average Zygerrian had never seen a credit's worth of the wealth slavery had brought their elite. Did they deserve to die too, for the crimes of their overlords? *No, of course not,* thought Esera. *I'm here to give them a chance, as much as I'm here to give these slaves a chance.* This could not end in fire, no matter how much some of these Zygerrians deserved to die.

Faera helped Esera get ready for her real meeting with the King, which included something to clear up her head. Esera was tempted to choose the most conservative dress of the three she'd brought, but she found her courage and went the opposite direction. *I'm his weakness,* Esera thought. *Maybe I can keep him off-balance.* Besides, the lower neckline and shorter sleeves would be more comfortable in the heat, wouldn't they? She double checked that her comlink was secure, hidden in the necklace that she wore. A decoy sat more obviously on her wrist. Esera departed her quarters looking even more the part of the Raxian lady than yesterday, with R8 and two B2s in tow.

But R8 was not welcome at the meeting on one of the palace's outdoor terraces. "No, no, no, I'm sorry, Lady Komara, but I have a rule against astromech droids," Atai said, waving his hand at R8. "Last time one was near me, it spat out three lightsabers and I nearly got killed by a Jedi. I don't want that thing anywhere near me. It's nothing personal, just a matter of principle."

Thank you, Master Kenobi, Skywalker, Ashoka, Esera thought glumly, gesturing for R8 to wait inside the palace. The B2s took up station at the doorway, and Atai's royal guard lurked around the terrace. "That's an odd phobia, your highness," said Esera.

"You don't survive on the throne by being reckless," Atai said. "Did you sleep well last night?"

"I slept fine, thank you," said Esera. "Give my compliments to the cooks, that was the best meal I've had in years."

"I'll be sure to," said Atai, with that same smile that just only managed to hide his fangs. "I'd be honored if you would join me again tonight..."

Esera didn't know if she'd be able to handle that, now that she knew what he wanted to do to her. It was so obvious in hindsight, she'd been an idiot not to see it. "We shall see, your highness. But first, I should tell you the purpose of my mission here."

"Yes... I'm curious as to what you might be after." Atai leaned back in his chair, eyes fixed on the horizon before them. "An arms deal? Rights of passage? Trade? Zygerria always has slaves for sale, you know."

It took a lot of effort not to tell the King that Grievous wanted to annex his empire and crush his slave trade, with the alternative being turning the planet's surface into a molten slag. "My government believes the time has come to strengthen our ties, your highness. They want to bring Zygerria formally into the fold."

"Well then," said Atai, putting his hand on his chin. "Zygerrians do not like being subjects, you know."

No one does, but that's never stopped you, has it? "You wouldn't be subjects. We are the Confederacy of *Independent* Systems, your highness. Unlike in the Republic, you'd be free to leave. At the conclusion of the war, that is."

"The war is not going well, last I saw," said Atai, giving her a look out of the corner of his eyes. "The Separatist state is split six different ways, not counting your besieged Inner Rim and Core holdings..."

"Four different ways." Esera wouldn't mention that the Ryloth pocket had collapsed and Thyferra was abandoned. "Should you join us, those four will become three."

Atai put the picture together in his head. "I wasn't aware the Gordian Reach had joined the Separatist cause."

"They haven't." Esera didn't even know if anyone even lived in the void of space between Serenno and Zygerria. "After you join the Confederacy, I will be moving on to negotiate with the Corporate Sector."

"How optimistic!" said Atai. "Spirited young women have always been my type, you know. But what makes you think you can succeed with them?"

"The Corporate Sector will fall into line when you've joined us."

"That is circular logic, Lady Komara. I should join you because the Corporate Sector is, and they'll be joining you because I've joined you... You see the flaw, yes?"

"There is no flaw, your highness," said Esera. "You're a smart man. You'd have to be, to hold the throne in a place like this. And the best way to keep that throne is to join us."

"Is it, now?"

"Don't think we haven't heard about your economic troubles, and unrest among the lower classes."

Atai suppressed any visible reaction to that, but Esera could feel his dismay through the Force. She was trying very hard to ignore what other feelings he was having towards her right now. The kind that made her skin crawl. "Alright, I'll humor you. Let's say I agree to join. What then?"

"Then, you'll be free to carry on as you see fit. With one exception."

"Oh?"

"Your *peculiar institution* is an embarrassment to my government, your highness. Simply put, it must go."

For a long while, Atai was silent. He stared at her coolly, incredulity and outrage roiling beneath his mask of civility. "Lady Komara, I'd think you were joking if you weren't so sincere. I'm afraid such a demand is impossible."

"That's a shame," said Esera, a sinking feeling in her stomach and spirit. *Contingency time, Khan. I know you're listening.*

"Your Confederacy is losing, that much is clear," Atai said. "That raid on Coruscant was all flash, and no substance. Your little victory there changed nothing. The Republic marches on, grinding you down system by system. You cannot hope to win. Zygerria gains nothing from any further association with Raxus. I could forgive you of your arrogance, or perhaps the fear of Grievous driving this *deal*. But considering you've threatened my hold on the throne, I'm not feeling very forgiving, all of a sudden. I think the Republic would be interesting in cutting us the same deal as they cut the Hutts, if we throw in something extra... a high-level Confederate diplomat, perhaps. And they won't care if she's damaged goods or not." Atai smirked, and clicked his comlink on. "Armin, I am revoking Lady Komara's diplomatic immunity. Arrest her."

Can he do that? Esera's hand went for her lightsaber and found nothing. R8 had it, and R8 was out of sight. Her eyes widened, and she desperately signaled her droids. *Her* droids, that never got less strange. In a second, the terrace went from tranquil to chaos. The Zygerrian royal guards turned on the B2s, but the droids were droids, and were already lurching into action.

One B2 smashed a nearby guard in the throat, collapsing his windpipe, and then blasted another guard's face into a sizzling mess. The other super battle droid got its own blasters deployed and opened up on every Zygerrian it could target, *full auto* as the clones would say. Esera threw herself to the tile deck, as a chain of red bolts flew over her head and singed the King's ear. For the first time in Esera's life, she was glad to hear the sound of the notorious wrist rocket screaming over her and impacting someplace further down on the terrace. At least a dozen Zygerrians went down before both droids were felled by a rotary blaster mounted on the next terrace up on the palace. *He must have been ready for this,* Esera thought. *And they still butchered his men!*

Esera had no time to reflect on the effectiveness of the B2 against anything that wasn't a clone trooper, because Atai wrapped his claws around her and yanked her to her feet. "You'll be paying for that, human," he growled. "Armin, take her to the dungeon. Bring her to my chambers tonight. Unspoiled."

"Yes, sire," said the captain, taking Esera by the arm just as he had last night.

"And just in case you had any hope," Atai went on, "you'd better abandon it. We've been blocking that communications link to your ship all morning. You're all alone now."

Her heart almost dropped into her stomach, hearing that. *Khan hasn't heard anything!* Esera realized.

"Come this way, Lady Komara," said Captain Armin.

"You're real polite for having just breached interstellar law," said Esera, looking for R8 as she was ushered back into the palace.

"Orders are orders, there's no reason to be uncivil about it," Armin said. R8 was behind a pillar, peeking out at the commotion. *Stay there,* Esera mouthed at him. He didn't move.

"Don't think I don't have a contingency for this," Esera said, hoping against hope a bluff might scare him. She wasn't about to spend a night with the King just to maintain her cover.

"One destroyer isn't a threat," said Armin. "They won't bombard the city with you still in it. You Separatists are too weak of mind to sacrifice one of your own for a cause. That's why droids do your fighting for you."

Esera eyed his gilded, scratch-free and polished armor in disgust. "Like you've ever fought anyone who could shoot back," she muttered. He ignored the remark.

"It's a shame things ended this way," Armin said. "The King plays rough with his toys, if you know what I mean. I don't think a soft, highborn Raxian lady like you will last the night."

Hold on, Esera thought suddenly. Maybe she wouldn't have to break her cover, if she *played* her cards right... "I don't think *he'll* last the night," Esera said, trying her hardest not to blush at what she was saying. "Do you want to make a bet, Captain?"

"Gambling is against regulations for the royal guard," sighed Armin. "But you can bet with the other human we found causing trouble today."

"Other human?" asked Esera. *What other human? Wait, oh no-*

Sure enough, in the cell next to the one she was gently pushed into, was Lieutenant Miha Voyan. Esera kept her face in a carefully controlled expression of neutrality. Voyan was wearing the most obnoxiously pink floral-patterned shirt in the world, and a matching maroon jacket and trousers. Worst of all was the ridiculous mirrored visor over his eyes. *Where the hell did he get that outfit?* Esera wondered. He wasn't looking too great either, there were some bruises on the side of his face.

"'Ey baby, how ya' doin'?" asked Voyan, in the most atrocious excuse for a working-class Humbariner accent Esera had ever heard. *At least he's staying in character...*

"Don't even start," Esera said, looking at him like how she imagined a noblewoman might look at a commoner.

"You two have fun together," said Armin. "But I warn you, pirate, if you touch the girl, you die."

"Who ya' callin' a pirate?" Voyan asked, his arms wide. "I'm a legitimate businessman, fuzzball!"

The captain of the guard departed silently. They waited until the dungeon door had closed, and then Voyan took off his visor. "This plan isn't working, Komara," he said, in his usual voice. Now that Esera really listened, she could hear a real accent, barely noticeable, but she had no idea where it could be from.

"You don't say!" Esera hissed. "What the hell are you doing down here? What did you do to get arrested? Your only job was get the freighter to the surface, offload the crates, and-"

"Clearly, I got it to the surface, and I did start to offload the crates," said Voyan. "But then customs showed up... with armed men. They weren't too friendly." He touched one of the bruises just forward of his ear. "The freighter you and Khan had me use was flagged as a part of a pirate fleet ten months ago, and there was still an outstanding bounty on its owner. Which is me, now."

Esera covered her face with her hands and sat down on the stone floor. "How did we miss that?" she groaned. "Khan was supposed to check these things!"

"It is entirely possible he may leave us here to die," said Voyan, giving Esera a resigned look. "The odds are not in our favor. Unless you have some kind of typical Jedi trick to get us out of this."

"It's not over yet, Lieutenant," said Esera, putting a fist in her palm. "The King is having me sent to his chambers tonight."

Voyan frowned. "Do you mean to seduce him?"

"That disgusting creep? Ew, gross! No, you idiot, the King doesn't know what I am. I'm going to turn the tables on him," said Esera. She stopped, and looked up. "Do you think this place is bugged?"

"I doubt it," said Voyan. "They're slavers, not Umbarans. They think those beneath them are broken, not plotting to overthrow them. Furthermore, the electrical lines to the lights are just stapled into the wall. And look how smooth the stonework is. Do you see the depressions in the steps leading up to the door? They've been eroded out by centuries of feet going up and down them. These dungeons are ancient, Komara. They likely have been here since before the Zygerrians got into space."

"Huh. That explains the iron bars instead of force fields." Esera curled up, bringing her knees up to her chin. "I wonder how many slaves have been tortured and killed down here."

"If you pull this plan together, not one more," said Voyan.

Esera glanced at him, surprised at the sudden change of heart in the mechanic. "Are you putting your faith in a former Jedi?" she asked.

"I have faith in Jedi tricks," said Voyan, giving her a cool look. "And consider this: Grievous doesn't like failure. Failure here is not an option."

You're damn right, Voyan. Grievous would cross into the afterlife just to torment me, I think. "Well, there's one of two things that'll happen tonight," said Esera. "They'll either take me to the King as I am, because he likes girls with some fight in them, though probably not the kind of fight I'll be giving him, or... or Captain Armin will drug me for his king's own safety, in which case..." Esera swallowed. "I won't be able to fight back, at all. If that's the case..." She closed her eyes, and reached out through the Force, and twisted the lock on Voyan's cell with a *click*. "No matter what happens tonight, you complete the mission. Find Tahnat, implement the contingency plan as best you can. There's a comlink hidden in my necklace, assuming they haven't found it. I doubt they took my jewelry far. We're being blocked from *Encounter* on that line, but that won't matter for surface communications. I'll call you if I take down the King. If not, forget about me, and do what you're here to do."

"I thought you'd ask me to come get you," said Voyan.

"The mission is more important than me," Esera said. The idea that she might find herself at the non-existent mercy of that awful man scared her, but she refused to let it get the best of her. *Whatever it takes to end this nightmare here, I'll do it.*

"I don't like leaving people behind," said Voyan, frowning. "But whatever it takes... I'll do it."

Interesting coincidence, he said what I was thinking. But with the Force around, is anything ever a coincidence? Do my thoughts and feelings leak to others? All she felt from the mechanic was a sense of apprehension... and anger. Neither showed on his face.

Voyan had nothing more to say. He put on his mirrored visor again, placed his hands behind his head, and laid back against the basalt stone wall. *What is his story?* Esera wondered. He was a human officer in a majority-alien Confederate Navy. He was an officer who did all the repair work he was probably supposed to oversee himself. He had the dull and lifeless personality of a man who lived only for his job, but claimed familiarity with intoxication and inebriation. *I suppose he's not any weirder than I am, to be fair*, Esera thought. Her story must have been just as mysterious to him. How many other Separatists

had such strange life stories? Back in the Republic, she'd worked with Jedi who all came from one place, or clones who all came from one place... There was little diversity of origin and belief there. Was everyone this interesting in where they came from?

Tonight, though, that was what Esera had to focus on. Despite the risk of putting the wrong – or right, as it were – idea about her real identity in someone's head, she decided to meditate. If they did drug her before taking her to the King, she'd need all the mental preparation she could get.

"Progress report, Khan," Grievous demanded. It was mid-afternoon on Zygerria, but it was the middle of the night for him. Not that he needed to sleep. *Invisible Hand* was quiet, but for the droids.

"I consider that we have reached the point organics would call interesting," Khan said. "Early in the morning, I lost contact with the surface. It was a highly specific jamming, targeting only the frequency I was using to listen in on Komara. I deployed a remote spy satellite shortly after their arrival on the surface, though, and it detected blaster fire on a palace terrace, the spectral analysis of which matched the kind our droids use. Furthermore, I have lost contact with Lieutenant Voyan before he activated the droids. I can only conclude they have been arrested and are most likely being held in the palace dungeons," Khan reported, hands behind his back. His hologram stood impassively before Grievous's desk.

"Arrested?" Grievous asked. "And you have done nothing?"

"My fleet's entire infantry compliment is already on the planet, sir," Khan said. "I am alone out here, but for the pilots and repair drones. However, I consider myself to be a competent soldier in my own right, I am fully prepared to extract them myself."

"This is quite the gamble, Khan," said Grievous.

"That is what I told Esera Komara. She was obstinate that even a low chance of success was enough. Esera Komara is obtuse."

Despite himself, Grievous cackled. "Yes, she is, isn't she? Call her sentimental next time you see her, it gets under her skin."

"Yes, sir," said Khan. "I recommended dropping an asteroid on the royal palace and bombing the cities until they unconditionally surrendered. Esera Komara became very upset at this."

"You will find that a common theme with her," said Grievous. "Her weaknesses are her feelings, driving her towards mercy and compassion when she would be better served by logic and pragmatism. But..."

If Khan had an eyebrow, he would have raised it, by the way he tilted his head. "But?"

"Do not underestimate her drive, Khan," said Grievous. "She has a strength of the spirit that may yet be useful to us."

"That is uncharacteristically sentimental of *you*, sir."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" asked Grievous. "Komara has impressed me before. I-" He caught himself before he said something stupid.

Khan picked up on his pause. "If you make a statement expressing a foolish organic sentiment such as 'I believe in her,' I will be forced to reevaluate my psychological profile of you, General."

Grievous pointed his finger at Khan. "Watch it, droid."

"Yes, sir. If you wish me to extract the organics, I am ready to do so. But as this is Komara's mission, I do not want to interfere without your direct orders."

The humans got themselves arrested, the droids are inactive, we've lost contact with everyone on the surface... At this point, Grievous would scrub the mission and start bombing things. Khan said it, though. This was Komara's mission. "Let her find a way out of this, Khan. I know this girl. She won't give up so easily."

Open, close, open, close, thought Esera, watching her right hand move. With careful focus, she could get her fist to close, but it was no longer an unconscious effort. And sometimes, it moved of its own accord, as some confused synapse fired off a signal that wound up in the wrong place. *Nothing will ever un-cauterize those nerves,* she knew. She really would need to learn to fight with her left hand. The right's unreliability would be a fatal distraction in combat.

That meant, whatever happened tonight, she'd be fighting with her left. Or both. It would be new, that was for sure.

"Awake," the voice of Captain Armin suddenly said, cutting through Esera's concentration. He'd descended into the dungeon, with two other guards.

"To hell with you, fuzzball," Voyan said in his horrible Humbariner accent, hands behind his head as he lay against the cell wall.

"I'm afraid you'll be the one going to this hell of yours, pirate," Armin said. "Or should I call you a Separatist agent? We found what was in that cargo of yours."

Voyan removed his mirrored visor and sat up, eyes betraying none of the rising anxiety Esera could feel from him. *After facing a mildly annoyed Grievous, maybe death doesn't seem so bad,* thought Esera.

"Your Humbarine accent is terrible, by the way," said Armin. "Your audacity astounds me. Of all the planets to fake an origin from, you chose one that you Separatists melted into glass."

"Actually, a professor of mine was from Humbarine," Voyan said, in his usual voice. "He was the first off-worlder I'd ever met who wasn't trying to sell me glitterstim."

"What backwater did they drag you up from?" Armin asked, not waiting for an answer. "You Separatists must really be desperate, sending little girls and bumpkins disguised as pirates with a handful of droids against us." The Zygerrian captain looked at Esera. "Yes, I called you a little girl, but I've got no idea who you are. My contacts on Raxus told me the only Komaras there are Stalimurian migrant workers. I'm thinking you're one of them, recruited as an agent. What did they promise you, little girl? Money, drugs, maybe even citizenship for your family? They didn't tell you they were expendable, did they? Think about that tonight. Now, please avert your eyes if you don't want to see your fellow Separatist die." He waved the guards forward, who leveled their blasters at Voyan. She felt Voyan's fear battling his determination to stay calm. *You're a Jedi, do something!* he seemed to be thinking, or maybe Esera really could hear his thoughts right now.

Maybe it was Captain Armin's mundane assumptions that were so far from the ridiculous truth, maybe it was that her enemies were making themselves so utterly despicable, but Esera couldn't stop herself from smiling. Armin tilted his head when he noticed. "Don't tell me you're one of those girls who gets excited by death," he said.

"It's really not him you should be worried about," said Esera. *Come on, girl, you saved the whole Confederacy without a lightsaber, you can take on three Zygerrian thugs!* she thought,trying to whip herself up into a fighting spirit. *You're not a Jedi, you're not obligated to play nice with monsters!*

"I see no reason why I should fear a short little urchin in disguise like you," sighed Armin. "Guards, take aim at the prisoner."

"If you're going to-" Voyan began to say to Esera.

"Last words are not permitted," Armin said. The two Zygerrians drew their plaster pistols and raised them, pointing them at Voyan. His eyes slid over to Komara again. *I should have walked out of here when I had the chance,* he thought, his inner voice as clear in Esera's mind as if he'd spoken out loud.

That's it! Esera reached out with the Force, and flung Voyan's unlocked cell door open, straight into the Zygerrians. The one hit by the leading edge was knocked to the floor, the one closer to the hinges stumbled backwards. Just like she'd done in her training with Grievous, Esera tugged on his ankle through the Force and he went down too.

Armin didn't waste time on exclamations of surprise or disbelief, he went for his own pistol. But Voyan was out of his cell, he tackled the captain and the pistol went skidding across the floor. Esera closed her eyes and focused again, getting her own cell open, and in that time one of the other Zygerrians was getting to his feet. They locked eyes.

"I don't know what magic tricks you're pulling, human, but they're not saving you!" the guard said, leaping at her. Esera saw it coming before it even happened, and she stepped aside, tearing the electro-whip from the guard's belt.

"She's a Jedi, you idiot!" Armin shouted from somewhere beyond her vision. "Don't-" His voice turned into a yowl of pain, courtesy of Voyan.

The Zygerrian pulled a vibroknife out of his boot, and lunged. He missed with the knife, but his shoulder took Esera square in the chest, and down they went too. Ignoring the pain and her sudden inability to breathe, Esera lashed out with the electro-whip, which wrapped around his neck.

Give up and I'll let you live, was what she would have said, if she'd had any air in her lungs. The Zygerrian was turning around, knife in hand, within easy striking distance. It was Esera or him. She activated the whip, and the current coursed through it, frying the guard's nervous system. His life-energy winked out in the Force, a feeling that once hit her like a boulder dropping into a pool, now no more than a pebble tossed into a sea.

Armin had his hands around Voyan's throat, Voyan's hand was scrambling for the pistol just out of reach. Esera called the pistol to her hand. *Please have a stun,* she thought, but no such luck. Esera took aim and shot the Zygerrian. His body collapsed onto Voyan, who started coughing up a storm.

"Good grief," he finally managed to say, "I'm an engineer, not a marine!"

Esera found her breath again. "And I'm supposed to be a Jedi, not a soldier," she said.

"I never knew there was a difference," Voyan muttered, rubbing his throat. His face was pale, and his hands were trembling. Mechanics probably didn't get this kind of adrenaline rush often. "You're nothing like the ones in the holovids."

"Holovids are propaganda," Esera told the mechanic, who curiously had just claimed to be an engineer. "Don't believe everything you see just because it fits what you'd like to think."

Voyan ignored her, and looked down at Captain Armin's dead body. "Well, so much for access to the King. I hadn't thought you had it in you."

"That story I told on *Invisible Hand* was true, you know," Esera said. "I've been on the front lines since the war began, I know how to kill. But... I really thought slavers would have stun settings for their blasters..."

Voyan picked up one of the guard's pistols. "These ones do," he told her.

A cold feeling came over Esera's heart. *The galaxy's better off with people like this dead,* she told herself. "What do we do now?" she asked.

"Am I in charge now?" Voyan asked back. "Because I'm about done with getting roughed up by these... fuzzballs."

"No, no, I'm still in charge. Right. Um..." Esera was distracted by a vision of what this scene might look like to anyone else. A girl in a flowy, formal dress and a man in a colorful suit that could have earned himself a place in the Coruscant Aquarium's Scarif coralfish tank standing amid three Zygerrian bodies. *Utterly ridiculous, what messed-up universe have I found myself in?* "Alright," said Esera, standing up straighter. "Getting to the King is going to be impossible now, so I guess we can't just take him hostage and make our demands."

"Why is it impossible?" asked Voyan. "Don't you Jedi usually just run in and kill anything in your path effortlessly?"

"Maybe if my name was Skywalker, or this was a holovid, but what did I just say about holovids?" Esera gave him a glare. "I can't do stuff like that. We need something more clever. We need to find Necho Tahnat."

"Right, the abolitionist... He's somewhere in these dungeons, isn't he?" asked Voyan.

"Yes. I sense that he's..." Esera closed her eyes, opened herself to the Force, and pointed. "That way!"

Voyan stared at her, his expression bordering on disgust. "And you say you're not like the ones in the holovids," he sighed.

"Don't start this now," said Esera. "Come on."

The dungeon was lightly guarded, and in one instance, a guard was asleep at his post, so the two were free to walk right past him. The cells on the upper levels were much nicer than the ones Esera and Voyan had been in. They had beds, sinks, refreshers, even a shelf for datapads and solid doors that allowed for some privacy, but for the viewport looking in. Captain Armin had been carrying some kind of key on him, they used it to open up each cell until they found their political prisoner.

"Necho Tahnat?" Esera asked, when they found the Zygerrian. He was huge, even bigger than the thugs they'd dispatched earlier. Tahnat was built like a barrel with tree trunks for arms and legs, and stood just as tall as Grievous. No wonder he won an appeal by combat. But he wasn't young; there was grey in his fur, his skin looked tough and leathery, and a pair of tiny spectacles sat on his nose. Supposedly, Tahnat was from the middle class, but if he couldn't afford modern medical treatment for aging eyes, then the Zygerrian middle class must not have been well-off at all.

"Moving up the schedule, are we?" Tahnat asked, in a voice deep enough to be its own baritone section of an orchestra.

"I'm Esera Komara, I'm here to rescue- wait, schedule?" Esera looked back at Voyan, who looked back at her, just as confounded.

"Yes, schedule," said Tahnat, moving for the door. Esera scrambled out of his way, lest he step on her by accident. At least she could take solace in the fact Voyan was dwarfed by the giant Zygerrian too. "Mofuwa told me the rescue wouldn't be happening for at least another week."

Esera and Voyan looked at each other again. "Did we just walk into someone else's plot?" she asked.

"I wouldn't discount that," the mechanic said.

"Mofuwa didn't send you?" Tahnat looked puzzled as he stretched his limbs in the hall.

"No..."

"Interesting. Well, this changes things. The Zygerrian National Worker's Alliance has been planning my release, but I didn't think I'd be getting out on my own." *Zygerrian National Worker's Alliance...* Esera had heard those three latter words before. But where?

"Well, congratulations, you got yourself out. Now you've got an opportunity to change your world, and you're going to take it," Esera said, doing her best commander's voice, the one she'd used for the clones. "Do you have people in the city?"

"I do," Tahnat said. "Any civilization not built on a sustainable base is doomed to failure. I know this, my people know this, and we are ready to do what we must to save our world."

"Good," said Esera, "because we've got some fighting to do. How fast can you have your forces assembled?"

"Thirty-six hours," Tahnat said. "It'll take time to sneak in the heavy weapons from the caches in the countryside."

"We won't need them. I want your men ready to go as soon as physically possible. My droids are already on the ground and will begin their assault any moment." Well, as soon as she was able to activate them.

"Droids? Here?" The big Zygerrian was bemused. "I didn't know Mofuwa had the Separatist Alliance's official backing-"

"Confederacy of Independent Systems," Voyan interrupted, in a sharp tone. "*Separatist Alliance* is a Loyalist propaganda term, made up to imply we're not a real, functioning state."

Tahnat laughed, which Esera felt through the floor as much as heard with her ears. "You Separatists are a proud lot, aren't you? Confederacy it is, just because you're here to help my people while the Republic sat by."

"It's the same where I'm from," Voyan said, giving Esera a glance through narrowed eyes.

"The rest of the galaxy doesn't see Zygerrians as you do, Mister Tahnat," Esera said. Rising to the defense of the Republic was a hard instinct to suppress, but she couldn't help herself. "You're all slavers, to them."

"Please, call me Comrade Tahnat."

"Comrade Tahnat, fine. Lieutenant Voyan and I are going meet up with my droid forces, you're going to summon your people and join in the assault on this palace." Esera pointed up at the floors above her. "Ignore everything else. We're going for the King. We call it a decapitation strike. Minimal casualties, maximum effectiveness."

"Be warned, Comrade Komara," Tahnat said. "Whoever kills the King has legal right to the crown, but Zygerrians will never accept an alien as monarch."

"I have no desire to be queen of this place. I'll leave his fate in your hands."

Tahnat nodded. "Very well. Now, how do we get out of here?"

"We find my comlink and hold out until help arrives," said Esera.

This didn't please Voyan. His brow furrowed. "That's your amazing plan? What happened to that contingency you went on and on about? The mission was to activate the droids and let them do the work while we stayed out of the way. I was and am fully prepared to do that, no matter what else happens, but holding out against an army like we're a bunch of y- *those* clone troopers? That's ridiculous! There's better ways to do this."

"Welcome to the battlefield," Esera sighed. "Things have to be changed on the spot. This is no different from what you do with your Vulture droids."

"Yes, it is!" said Voyan. That little flicker of anger that had been burning in him since their conversation in the cells flared up into a blaze of fury. "Our lives are on the line! I haven't fired a blaster since I signed on with the Trade Federation, I don't belong down here! You've had me beaten by slavers, thrown in jail, almost choked to death, and now you want me to go toe-to-toe with the entire palace guard? Damnit, woman, I'm an engineer, not a-"

Esera had heard enough. "You're a bloody mechanic and you will do as I say, *Lieutenant!*" she snapped. "You're with me, or you can go back to that cell I found you in. Got it?"

A silent, tense moment passed, before the man responded. "Understood," Voyan said, jaw clenched. He was bristling, and Esera had to close her mind to the stream of swear words he was thinking. *Can I really blame him?* Esera asked herself. *He's in way over his head right now. I didn't keep my cool in my first battle either. I'm surprised it took him this long to crack... At least he's angry, and not afraid. Better an angry man than a coward in a situation like this, right?*

"You remind me of my wife, Comrade Komara," muttered Tahnat, with a warm smile. "Lots of fire in a small package. I think you would make a good Zygerrian."

"Come on," Esera said, choosing to ignore his comment, "we're finding that comlink, and my droid."

The killing began when they left the dungeon. Tahnat shot both guards at the exit from behind, without hesitation. None of Esera's confiscated items were in the lockers at the entrance.

"I hope you got a good look at this place, I had a bag over my head on the way in," said Voyan.

"I've got an idea," said Esera. "If I was a security officer, and I just arrested a diplomat, the first thing I'd do is check their personal items for bugs... Where would I do that?"

"A lab," Voyan said.

"Zygerrians are not much for precision analytics," Tahnat remarked. "Try the armory."

"Thank you, comrade, I've always wanted to storm an armory while outnumbered a thousand to three," Voyan said.

"If it makes you feel better, pretend this is one of your holovids, and make me worth five hundred of them," Esera told him. That earned them a curious look from Tahnat. Of course, he didn't know Esera was a former Jedi. To him, she was just a young woman not dressed for the occasion.

The nice thing about an ancient palace like this one was that it had no cameras tracking them. They didn't need to crawl through dusty service tunnels in the walls to stay stealth, unlike during the corporate coup on Raxus. Esera tried not to reflect on the similarities between her situation and Grievous's. *At least I broke myself out,* Esera thought. Try as she might, their little party was leaving behind a trail of corpses. Some they could hide, others had to be left where they were.

Captain Armin's disappearance, and the disappearance or death of nearly half a dozen of the royal guard, plus the escaped prisoners, was causing no small amount of unease. Guards, bureaucrats, guests, and slaves alike were staying out of sight lest they be implicated in whatever was going on. Esera, Voyan, and Tahnat stood flat against a wall between two pillars as a lone guard rushed down a hall on who knew what errand, eyes fixed dead ahead.

"The vermin are panicking, now that I'm loose," Tahnat said.

"May they be too busy to worry about us," Voyan prayed.

The Force was with them, because they soon ran into a face Esera knew. "Faera!" she called. The Twi'lek slave girl turned around.

"Lady Komara!" Faera immediately bowed to her. "I'd heard you were arrested-" Her voice caught in her throat when she noticed Tahnat.

"The King didn't like the idea of giving up slavery," Esera said. She pointed at Tahnat. "So I found someone who was more receptive."

"Is he..?"

"Yes, I am Necho Tahnat," said the big Zygerrian, frowning at the girl. "You may have heard of my abolitionist essays. I seek your freedom not out of the kindness out of my heart, but because it would merely get you off my people's planet and allow us to flourish without competition from foreign labor."

"Foreign labor!? Is that what you call-" Faera closed her eyes and clenched her fists, exhaling loudly. "Well, I see what you meant, Lady Komara, what you said to Yashar this morning. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"We're looking for the armory," Esera said.

Voyan had an addition to make: "Preferably a back entrance that won't end in us being pinned down in a firefight we can't win."

Faera tilted her head. "Who are you? And *what* are you wearing?"

"This is Lieutenant Miha Voyan, Confederate Navy. He brought in the droid army, but things didn't go to plan," Esera explained. "I can't even begin to tell you why he's dressed like a coralfish."

"This was in style on Druckenwell eight years ago- you know what, we don't have time for jokes! Armory, Twi'lek!" Voyan waved his blaster in her general direction. He avoided pointing the barrel at anyone, though, so Esera knew he actually had been trained at some point.

"I never thought I'd be happy to hear about a Separatist droid army arriving..." Faera turned about and led them back the way they came. Three became four, and playing the game of dodging patrols and pedestrians became harder. A Twi'lek slave, an unusually large Zygerrian in shabby clothes, and a human live-action roleplaying as a coralfish did not constitute a normal group, especially not when their fourth member was dressed for high-level diplomatic functions. Running in a dress and shoes made to look nice rather than be comfortable wasn't easy, either; Esera could feel a new empathy for thousands of holovid drama actresses. Faera suddenly slid to a halt, and raised her hand.

"...what do you mean, the Captain's dead? How? When? Where? Who?" a voice asked, spitting out questions like a rotary blaster.

"Shot in the dungeon, sir, you're in command now. The Separatist prisoners are lose, they took Tahnat with them."

"The abolitionist traitor!" the first voice hissed. "Raise the alarm, alert the King. Has anyone told him about the deactivated droid army in that freighter?"

"No, sir. We have our men setting up a perimeter around it." The troop of Royal Guard walked straight through the intersection of halls, not even looking down the other where Esera and her gang were hiding in the shadows.

"Why haven't you just blown them all up?" asked the Zygerrian in charge, waving his hands in the air. "Are you all idiots?"

"No orders came through, sir! If we do anything without the Captain's approval we'll be shot, but he's dead now, and we had to find out who is..." The voices faded away. Esera looked up at Tahnat.

"That's one inefficient military you have, comrade," she said.

"Just another vice to rid ourselves of. The monarch lives in paranoia of coups and assassinations. The Royal Guard are kept divided and weak, paralyzed by a micromanaged chain of command, to ensure there can be no coup." Tahnat looked down the hall at the retreating guards. "This whole civilization is a facade waiting to crumble unless we do something."

"Maybe it'd be better if it did," Voyan said under his breath. Tahnat's ears twitched, but he said nothing in response. Faera nodded along with the mechanic. They resumed course for the armory, and suddenly Tahnat did have something to say.

"The droid army isn't activated?" he asked Esera. "You said we would only have to wait for them."

"Uh..." Esera scrambled for an explanation. "Well, they're all there. We just have to turn them on and survive until they get here."

"I see," said Tahnat. "You don't have a plan, you're just making this up as you go."

"I learned from the best." If she was talking about her master or Grievous, she couldn't say.

The palace alarm didn't go off until they were almost to the armory. "This is where the fun begins," Esera groaned. Tahnat just grunted. The blaster pistol they'd given him looked comically small in his huge hands. His trigger finger could barely get through the loop. "Faera," Esera said, "go find Yashar. Tell the others that this place is about to become a battleground, stay out of the way and don't resist the droids."

"We're really going to be freed if you win?" asked Faera, eyes wide and hopeful.

"My boss grew up fighting slavers like these," Esera told her. "Now, go!" The Twi'lek rushed off.

The three checked the gas cartridges on their blaster pistols, and made sure they were set to maximum power. In the Force, Esera felt Tahnat's subdued excitement, a veteran fighter ready to kill for a cause he believed in. Voyan was just a big bundle of anger and anxiety, mixed together in a cocktail of nervous energy. "Keep your head in the game, Lieutenant," Esera told him.

"I've never killed anyone before," he said quietly, glaring at a blank spot on the wall.

"The first time is the worst. It gets easier after that." Esera's stomach twisted at her own words. "Follow my lead and you'll make it out alive, got it?"

"Right," Voyan said, nodding.

How many people have I said that to? How many loyalists, how many clones? And how many of them had never come out of those missions alive? *No!* Esera told herself. *Don't think about failures! This is going to work!* She submerged her conscious mind in the Force, trying to see the possible futures before her. But the future that far out remained clouded, all Esera could see would be what was about to happen in the moment she lived in.

"Here we go," Esera said. She took point, and peeked around the corner into the hallway leading to the armory. "Two guards at the door."

"Easy," said Tahnat. "You take the near one, I'll take the far one."

"Now!"

The two popped out, Esera dropped to one knee to stabilize her aim, and planted a single bolt straight into the chest of the nearest guard. Tahnat merely pointed his pistol down the hall and shot until something hit.

"Get in there!" Esera ordered to her more-mobile companions. She hobbled after them, trying to take off her shoes as she half-ran, half-stumbled forward. There was a good bet she'd be stepping in blood or broken glass at some point, but being dead because she tripped was worse than being in pain.

Tahnat was the first in, shooting at everything he saw, the undisciplined trigger finger of a self-assured civilian who had been in a few fights. Voyan immediately took cover behind workbench, taking shots whenever he could. Esera strode in after, throwing her mind into the Force, letting it guide her aim, placing one shot in each target she saw, quickly and cleanly. *Target,* she thought through the haze of battle, *that's a nice way to pretend they're not real people.*

Barely ten seconds had passed, and it was over. Tahnat had been shot twice but was still standing, Voyan was pale and breathing heavily, and nine Zygerrians were dead on the floor. Only a few had died holding their weapons, the others had been caught by surprise.

"Good job. Voyan, patch Tahnat up, I'll work on communications," said Esera.

"Right," Voyan said, a tremor in his voice. *Yeah, it's his first battle alright,* thought Esera. She didn't think he'd managed to kill anyone, though.

"I'm quite fine," Tahnat protested, pushing his spectacles back up his nose. "You've never seen a Zygerrian bar fight."

"I'm sure they're deadly," Esera said, going through all the storage lockers. Most of them were just arms and armor. But the big Zygerrian's hunch paid off. "Aha!" she exclaimed, holding up her necklace. "Here it is!"

"Do you know how to adjust that thing?" asked Voyan.

"Uh-"

"Give it to me, *you* fix up the big guy," said the mechanic.

Esera let him do his thing, and applied two bacta patches to Tahnat. "You're much nicer than my wife," he told her, chuckling to himself.

"Please stop comparing me to your wife," Esera sighed. "I've already had... unsolicited advances made on me by one of your kind." She kept in touch with the Force, and she could feel other presences approaching. "Get ready, here comes the counter-attack."

"I'm on the frequency for the droids," Voyan said, somewhat more collected now that he was in his own element. "I don't have the activation code-"

"I do," Esera said, switching on the comlink necklace. "Esera Komara, code three three eight."

"That's it?" Tahnat asked from over his shoulder. He'd taken up position behind one of the workbenches, now armed with a full-size heavy blaster.

"I'm not good with numbers!" Esera told him.

The channel came to life. "Activation complete, we are awaiting your orders, Lady Komara," said the deep synthesizer voice of the BX-series commander unit.

"Fight your way out of the enemy perimeter, storm the palace. Spare those who surrender, do not target non-Zygerrians," Esera told him. "Don't worry about holding anything but the palace and spaceport. We're going for the King above all else."

"Roger roger," said the droid.

"Help is on the way," Esera told her companions.

"Can we last that long?" asked Voyan.

"Two of my B2s took down a dozen of the royal guard this morning," Esera said. "I have three platoons marching out of that cargo ship right now, and those are the just the supers. Do you think anything's going to stop them?"

"Well-" The mechanic paused, before frowning. "They die so easily in the Republic holovids, and are almost invincible in ours... but this isn't a holovid, is it?"

"Now you're getting it, Lieutenant," said Esera, clapping his shoulder. "Remember, those Zygerrians want to kill us, so kill them first. We only need to hold out until the droids become more of a threat than we are."

"Got it," said Voyan.

"Mofuwa is going to love this," said Tahnat.

"You'll have to tell me who he is when this is over, but we've got company!" Out in the hall, the royal guard reinforcements had arrived. Esera reached out with her hand, just as the thermal detonators came flying in. They bounced off a wall of thin air, back into the hall, to curses and screams that were soon silenced by the explosions.

"Where'd you get a force field generator?" Tahnat asked, a bewildered look on his face.

"You'll find I'm full of surprises," Esera said. She could feel that were were still more outside. They came in the old-fashioned way, in full armor and guns blazing. Tahnat's big blaster punched straight through the armor, but Esera and Voyan had to be careful in their aiming, and Voyan for one wasn't feeling careful. He fired wildly, and finally started landing bolts on target. Voyan's inaccurate spray of blaster fire provided a nice distraction for Esera, she dropped three Zygerrians while they were stunning by the barrage.

More stormed in, and then Tahnat's blaster started clicking; he threw it in the face of one of the guards and charged him, tackling him to the floor. *Idiot!* Esera thought. She threw her reach out into the Force, and twisted one of the other guard's helmets around so he couldn't shoot Tahnat. Another, who had discarded his damaged gun, jumped over the workbench while the mechanic was loading a new gas cartridge into his pistol, and lifted Voyan up by his throat. But he didn't panic, he got the gun under the Zygerrian's chin and pulled the trigger. Both fell to the floor. Esera shot the final one standing. Tahnat's victim had his face smashed into a bloody pulp.

"Exhilarating!" Tahnat breathed, a mad grin on his face. "I should have been a gladiator, comrade Komara. But no, I'm a family man... Ah, what kind of life have I missed?"

"I think you made the better choice," Esera said. She wiped the sweat from her brow, and turned to Voyan, whose throat had yet another set of bruises on it.

"What is with these fuzzballs and strangling?" he asked hoarsely, as he coughed. "I swear, the only good alien is a dead alien!" *Uh, what?* Esera asked herself. He was lucky Tahnat wasn't listening. Separatists weren't supposed to say things like that. The mechanic looked down at the dead Zygerrian. "I think I was waiting for this moment all my life, Komara, I just never knew it," said Voyan. "To finally be able to fight back, it feels... powerful."

"Don't get hooked on it," Esera warned him. As much as she'd like to talk about the morality of violence and self-defense, there wasn't time for that.

"I'd much rather be back on the ship right now," Voyan said. "But I'm not afraid anymore. I won't live on my knees ever again."

"That's good, Lieutenant, fear leads to... dark places," said Esera, not entirely sure what the mechanic was talking about. "Just don't let it get to your head. You're not immortal and you're not above judgment."

"Right," said Voyan. The last thing Esera needed was a self-righteous murderer like Aspar on her hands.

Esera's necklace-communicator chimed. "Lady Komara," the commando droid said, "we have begun our assault in the palace and will breach its walls momentarily." The palace suddenly shook. "The first units have entered."

"Good," Esera said. "Very good. Um... Crush the royal guard. Make them see how pointless resistance is." She turned to her companions. "We need to get the King before they can figure out what's going on. I only have a few thousand droids down here, if we don't cut the head off the snake right now, this could get very messy."

"Zygerrians are not cowards, Atai will fight," said Tahnat.

"Will he?" Esera wondered. "If we've destroyed his royal guard, if we've got his sons, if we have him at our mercy..." It was a Grievous-level of low move to take the man's family hostage, but the more Esera thought about it, the more she realized it was her best bet. Atai didn't know what kind of woman she really was, would he dare call her bluff?

"Why don't we let the droids corner him?" asked Voyan. His voice was definitely hoarser now, he'd need to get that checked out when this was over.

"Zygerrians are not cowards-" Tahnat started again, but Esera put on her commanding voice again.

"We will lead the droids," she said. "Lieutenant Voyan and I are agents of the Confederacy, you are the apparent future leader of your people. It is proper we take part in this, and not hide here."

The mechanic shrugged, and went for one of the smaller armor pieces in the armory. Esera could feel that he was more ready for battle now than he had been only half an hour ago. She wouldn't need armor, though, she put her faith in the Force. Well, unless someone out there had a slugthrower. But such a weapon seemed too lethal for slavers seeking control, not carnage.

During the momentary lull, Esera got in touch with R8, who had been lurking in the service levels of the palace since her arrest. She gave him a location to meet at, Esera wanted her lightsaber back. She also put her shoes back on. More running seemed unlikely at this point.

No second counterattack on the armory ever came, all the Zygerrians had deployed to the palace terraces and gates to defend against the droids. But there was no stopping the Separatist onslaught. "I've never seen droids acting so effectively before," she said to Voyan, as they went to meet the commando droid squad.

"Your clones are a special breed, just like you-"

Esera elbowed him sharply, tossing her head in Tahnat's direction. "He doesn't know!" she hissed.

"Know what?" Tahnat asked.

"About the effectiveness of the droid army," Esera told him. "Even this small number is making short work of the Royal Guard."

Her words were prophetic. As they made their way to through the palace, the sounds of blasters and screams of the wounded echoing through empty halls, they saw remains of the slaughter the droids had inflicted. The palace was littered with Zygerrian dead, the walls pockmarked by blaster bolts, cracked by thermal detonator explosions. Slaves peeked out nervously from behind doors, shock and amazement on their faces. In one of the grand halls, they met with the BX-series commander.

"Lady Komara," the stout-snouted droid said, saluting. "Organized resistance has collapsed on the lower levels, but the fighting is ongoing around the throne room chamber."

"Then that's where we need to be," Esera said.

"There is a commotion in the city as well, but we have no units in it."

"Those would be my men," Tahnat said. "I'd like it if you didn't shoot them."

"Acknowledged," said the droid.

The ongoing fighting didn't have much further to go. The more concentrated the enemy became, the better the droids performed. The OOM-series security droids were little different than their B1 cousins, but Esera saw for the first time how they would take cover, and aim their shots. None of the *spray and pray* that the holovids showed, as the clones called it. The B2s marched forward, inevitable and implacable, absorbing dozens if not hundreds of blaster shots. Unlike the clones' DC-15 blaster rifles, the weapons the Zygerrians used simply couldn't penetrate the B2's armor, even at close range.

It must be terrifying for anyone but a clone or Jedi to face those things, Esera thought. She and her group had nothing to do but stand back and watch the droids brute force their way to the throne room. First in were the commando droids, jumping and rolling into action like murderous acrobats. Their actions looked silly, but they were effective, nothing touched them as they destroyed the Zygerrian's formation. When the other droids entered, only a handful of the royal guard were even watching the door. The battle was over in less than a minute. King Atai was the last to give up, the commando droids dragged him before the three organics, and threw him at their feet. Better, smarter words existed for this moment, but Esera had a moment of wit she refused to pass up:

"Well, well, well," Esera said, looking down at the defeated king. "These aren't your chambers, your highness, but here I am, unspoiled."

Atai sneered up at her. "If you're going to kill me, kill me, girl!"

"I think not," Tahnat said, stepping forward. "King Atai of the house of Molec, your reign it at an end. The Zygerrian people will take back what is theirs."

"You!?" The King let out a disgusted sigh. "I have nothing to say to a plebeian miner."

"Is that so?" Tahnat made a show of looking disappointed.

"I recommend surrendering," Esera said.

"The Zygerrians will never accept Separatist rule, I'd give my life-"

Esera took a page from Grievous's book, and leaned over him. "Would you give the lives of your sons?" she asked. Atai bared his teeth, but he had no answer. "Give out the order, your highness. I can't guarantee you your life, but I can theirs."

Clean-up took all night. One by one, the garrisons of the planet submitted to the new regime even as it was being built from nothing. Word spread around that there was an entire Separatist fleet waiting to land. Little did they know, the droids in the palace and spaceport were the only droids in the entire sector. But such was the power of the Separatist military machine that the whole of Zygerria stood down from a fight they would have won in a matter of hours if they'd known the truth. Tahnat's people seized control of the capital, and cells rose up in the other cities to take power.

Esera and Voyan stood on the sidelines as Tahnat put together a government on the fly, trying to get into contact with Grievous. They received an unexpected guest. "Who is it?! Who did they send!? Who ruined my plan?!" shouted a voice. The droids, under orders to harm no non-Zygerrian, escorted a man into the throne room.

"Lady Komara," a droid said, "this man claims to be-"

"Lieutenant-Colonel Mofuwa, I will talk for myself, droid," said he. *Ah, Comrade Mofuwa,* Esera thought. He was more of a Voyan than a Tahnat in build, but he was scarred and battle-worn. Mofuwa was dressed in civilian clothes, but he held himself with the kind of military discipline Esera had seen in the clones countless times. His bronze skin was the complete opposite of the starship-induced paleness of Voyan and Esera.

"Now I ask again, who the hell are you?" he asked. "State Security? Military Intelligence Directorate? Some damned rogue university students?"

"I ask the questions here, *comrade.* Who the hell are *you?*" Esera asked back, hands on her hips and face set like a very unamused noblewoman.

"Lieutenant-Colonel Mofuwa-"

"Who are you *with*?"

"I am an officer of the Nimbus Commandos," he said. "I'm here in the authority of the Jabiimi National Worker's Alliance to spread the revolution."

Nimbus Commandos? Here? This day got stranger and stranger. "I'm Esera Komara, diplomatic envoy speaking directly on behalf of General Grievous, Head of State of the Confederacy of Independent Systems," said Esera. "We're on the same side, comrade."

Mofuwa stared at her in disbelief. He was just as shocked she was here as she was of him. "No way are *you* working for Grievous," he said. "Do you have any idea of what you've done? How many months of work you've upset? You forced our hand far too early, none of our assets are in place-"

"Comrade Mofuwa," Tahnat's deep voice boomed. "Leave Lady Komara alone. She was arrested by the former king in breach of diplomatic immunity, so she decided to break me out to help overthrow him. You have to respect that initiative."

"Do you really think that mad cyborg sent a little girl like her? Look at her face, she can't even be twenty!"

"Is twenty young for a human?" Tahnat mused aloud.

The Force had once again aligned time and space perfectly, because Esera's communication finally got through to wherever the cyborg was now. A fuzzy, life-size hologram of Grievous sprang to life among the organics. "Komara, I was wondering when you'd call," he said, before turning to stare at Voyan, Tahnat, and Mofuwa.

"Grievous, I present to you the new... ruler of Zygerria, Necho Tahnat," said Esera. "And Lieutenant-Colonel Mofuwa of Jabiim. Apparently, I walked in on someone else's plot."

"Necho Tahnat, is it?" Grievous stood up to his full height, making himself taller than the Zygerrian. "I sent my agent to annex your planet, Zygerrian. Disappoint her, and you will disappoint me. And I am not someone to disappoint."

Voyan rocked back and forth on his heels a little. He probably knew this better than most in the galaxy. "General, you have my people's eternal gratefulness for helping rid ourselves of our masters and their imported laborers," said Tahnat. "Zygerria will take her place in the Sep- *Confederacy,* effective immediately."

Nice save, thought Esera.

"Importer laborers!" scoffed Grievous, waving a hand and turning back to Esera. "Well done, Komara. It seems my faith in you has been rewarded."

"Hey, Grievous," Esera said, wanting to use his name without a title again, just to rub it in the faces of the three men. "I just added another system to our cause with only a few hundred dead. Aren't you glad we didn't turn this planet to slag?"

The cyborg narrowed his eyes, and turned to Tahnat. "There's always a chance in the future," he said. "I'll have no choice, if I catch them using such imported laborers again."

"This shameful chapter of our history is closed, General," Tahnat swore, raising his hand. "Zygerria enters a new age with the dawn."

"See to it," Grievous said. "And now a warning for you, Komara. You are my agent. You speak with my authority. Never let some small-time petty criminal arrest you again. No one crosses me and lives, I expect the same of you."

"I-" Esera stopped, and considered the things that Atai might have been doing to her right now if things had gone differently in the dungeon. Cold fingers crawled down her back, and she shivered. "Yes, you're right, Grievous. No more playing nice. No more being a victim."

"Good," said Grievous. "Your Jedi days are finished. Carry yourself with strength, not humility."

Mofuwa and Tahnat looked at each other, and then at Esera. *Damn you, Grievous,* thought Esera. She'd *almost* managed to avoid blowing her cover. "Understood. I will continue on to the next phase of the operation." The cyborg nodded, and the conversation was over. The hologram shut off. Voyan suddenly yawned, and Esera checked a chronometer. "Oh, it's three in the morning already," she said, yawning too. "I'm going to bed. R8, you three," she pointed at two commando droids and Voyan, "with me."

"What did the General mean by Jedi, Lady Komara?" Tahnat called after her.

"Another life, Comrade Tahnat," Esera told him without breaking stride. "Reflect on the irony the universe has been filled with, lately."

"You should have seen the look on his face," Voyan said quietly as they walked.

"I felt it in the Force just fine," said Esera. "Good work today, Lieutenant. You survived your first battle."

"Hopefully last," said the mechanic. "I prefer fixing things to breaking them."

"Yes..." Esera considered those words, but her brain was already turning off at the promise of sleep. "Go back to *Encounter* and find a medical droid," Esera told him. "Then tell Khan to get into orbit, we're heading out to our next destination tomorrow. We'll chew him out about the pirate ship thing when we're back up there."

"I'd live on that ship if it kept me from getting strangled by aliens again. Oh, and thanks, Komara." *For keeping us alive,* were the unspoken words there.

"I do try, Lieutenant," said Esera.

For the moment, there was peace between Separatist officer and former Jedi. And there was peace between Separatists and Zygerrians, too. The slaves would be freed as the sun rose on a new day, and a civilization would begin to reshape itself into something better. *We fixed more than we broke, today,* thought Esera. *A lot of people died, and some of them probably deserved it, but we created a future for this place that it never had before.* Finally, something had turned out for the better. She held onto that thought as she fell asleep.

Author's blog and rambling: Yeah, this was supposed to be done before the end of September, it wasn't. It's also twice as long as I intended (our longest chapter yet I think). I apologize for nothing, real life's decided once more to count how many ways it can screw with my obligation priorities. It's not like I don't have an outline for the story, I know where I want to end it and I'm pretty sure I know how I want to get there, but on this chapter particularly I kept getting close to the end, realizing I hated what I wrote, deleting it, and starting over. I'm only barely satisfied with this. Oh well. Once I'm done with this story, I can move on from Star Wars (thanks, Disney?), so I mean to see this through to the end.

This leads me to the question I ask of you readers. We are ~130K words into a story that was only supposed to be ~200K words, and we're only now reaching a point near the end of act two, of what would ostensibly be a five act story. At this rate, it'll be another decade before this story is done, and I do want it done so I can say I finished at least one thing in my life. Should I speed things up? Should I be less afraid to do time skips instead of showing full sequences that drag on for 11K words and take weeks if not months to write? Please tell me in the comments. Some of you have expressed how hard it is to come by a "good" (so you guys say) CIS-focused story, even if it is an AU, and I want to give you a product worthy of the time you've invested in sticking with a hack like me, so that's why I'm asking.

< Prev | 22. Chapter 22: Regime Change | Next >

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